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ABSTRACT

Importance of the Constitution as the supreme law of the land and the reported failure of the United States youth to have been genuinely educated about the Constitution raises questions regarding teaching. One concerns what teachers know about the Constitution and the other is what they believe about teaching. This study investigates these questions at a junior high school level, a setting where students are commonly taught about the Constitution. Teachers were studied as they taught the Constitution. Qualitative research and naturalistic observation methods were used. The study concludes that the difficulty in teaching about the Constitution is that the values and concepts essential to its fullest understanding require an individual act of contemplation and interpretation. The student must construct meaning in a manner which is different than learning simply that there is a Bill of Rights or that there is a separation of power. To comprehend the student must have the opportunity to learn in the presence of a capable teacher. The teachers in the study behaved in a rational manner and made decisions according to an explicit and implicit set of standards. On one hand the teachers honored the ideal and expressed high regard for the idea of teaching about the Constitution. On the other hand higher priority was given to keeping order and to "cover" United States history and to "go by the textbook." It is necessary for the teachers of social studies to have both scholarly knowledge of the subject matter and pedagogy, and training of such intensity that the teacher can routinely carry out a program of civic education. (APG)

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Summary of Research Findings

Teaching about the Constitution: Relationships between Teachers' Subject Matter Knowledge, Pedagogic Beliefs and Instructional Decision Making Regarding Selection of Content, Materials, and Activities

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The complete report of these research findings will be found in:

Hyland, J. T. (1985). Teaching About the Constitution: Relationships Between Teachers' Subject Matter Knowledge Pedagogic Beliefs, and Instructional Decision Making Regarding Selection of Content, Materials and Activities. Michigan: University Microfilms International Publication 8513125.

The importance of the Constitution as the supreme law of our land and the reported failure of American youth to have been genuinely educated about the Constitution raises questions regarding teaching. One concerns what teachers know about the Constitution, and another concerns what teachers believe about teaching. The purpose of this study was to investigate these questions at the junior high school level, a setting where students are commonly taught about the Constitution.

Methodology. The purpose was to construct an accurate description of the manner in which teachers' subject matter knowledge and pedagogic beliefs link to their choices of subject matter, content, materials, and activities. Teachers were studied as they taught the Constitution. Qualitative research and naturalistic observation methods were used in this study. The research setting was a Junior High School located in a large metropolitan area of the western United States. The data included systematic observation, structured and unstructured interview, collection of artifacts, questionnaire and written examination, as well as video-taping.

Findings

Substantive knowledge. The teachers demonstrated a limited understanding of the Constitution. They described the Constitution in elementary terms and seldom provided illustrations of issues, dates, articles, or clauses beyond those contained in the eighth grade textbook. The teachers were unable to provide adequate explanations of why the Constitution was written.

The teachers did demonstrate familiarity with general basic principles of the Constitution such as the rule of law and separation of powers .

However they also demonstrated a limited ability to provide examples of these basic principles. Thus the presentation of abstractions often amounted to mere slogans .

Out of ten historians prominent in the field of Constitutional history the teachers were all able to identify only one, Charles Beard. This is interesting since Beard's economic interpretation is inadequate on several grounds.

Planning. The teachers planned instruction in a fashion consistent with other research on teacher planning. They were concerned with the selection of content which was simple, basic knowledge and were not concerned with the nature of the subject matter. They did not probe into the meaning of the Constitution. Planning was loosely structured with a focus on day to day happenings. Adolescent learning theory was not a factor in their planning. The teachers were concerned with time and the problem of "covering" material. Planning could be best characterized as a linear process which did not include long term considerations. Finally, for these teachers the planning process was an individual and private act.

Pedagogic Beliefs. The teachers commonly perceived themselves as being in charge of instruction and described themselves as a "guide" for the students. They viewed the students as "not ready," and described their students as deficient in reading, writing, ability to carry on discussion or make an oral report, and unable to accomplish critical thinking and higher conceptual understandings.

The teachers considered the teaching of basic facts (dates, places, names) as important but had mixed viewpoints regarding the teaching of a broader perspective and ability to use ideas. The teachers conceived of learning in broadly based terms of acquiring knowledge and did not

conceive of learning in terms of ability and motivation or the quality and quantity of instruction.

All of the teachers considered an orderly classroom crucial, even "important to my sanity" as one said. They defined an orderly classroom as one which was businesslike. The "kids are working" not bothering people, they are productive and "get their money's worth." In matters of discipline the teacher is the final authority. They were firm in this notion; "I impose discipline," "I make the rules," but they were equally strong in expressions of frustration with student discipline problems.

Interactive Patterns

There were distinctive patterns of teacher-pupil interaction. These were: giving direction, conducting recitation, and keeping order.

Giving Direction. Three styles of giving direction were observed: implicit, perfunctory, and professional. The implicit pattern is one in which the teacher simply begins an activity without a verbal statement of purpose. It is as though the act of opening the textbook, passing out the worksheet, or announcing the task was sufficient to focus the students' attention and create a framework for the information to be taken up and acted on by the students. The implicit pattern is characterized by brevity of teacher statements, "O.K., take out the paper from Friday," a minimum of detail about the task and an absence of any stated purpose. This pattern gets the students busy.

A similar pattern of giving direction is one in which the teacher gives perfunctory attention to the subject matter. The teacher will give a definition or some limited discussion of the task to be undertaken. Although attention is given to the subject matter, the teacher does not attempt to build on the students' life experiences and does not explicitly set out any purpose.

In the professional pattern of giving direction the teacher provided examples and modeled. The teacher read the directions and asked questions to detect student uncertainty. This pattern was distinctive, aiming at making certain the students understood what to do and how.

Conducting Recitation. The teachers' behavior was consistent with descriptions of recitation reported in national studies. The teacher controls and dominates instruction. Their patterns of recitation took several distinctive forms. These were: pseudo-recitation, quasi-team work, traditional, and professional.

Pseudo-recitation was a pattern of instruction dominated by the teacher where student attention was not required, and student questions were not encouraged. Pseudo-recitation accentuated the passage of class time. Students completed deskwork individually and sat quietly while the teacher rapidly reviewed and gave the "correct" answer. The students didn't do anything with the materials except copy answers from text. There was no inquiry process in which student elaborations are aired. Pseudo-recitation is not a form of instruction as much as it is a form of non-teaching.

A contrasting form consisted of dividing the class into teams in which two students worked together on the lesson. The process represented a form of quasi-teamwork because it was characterized by a dependence on a single task and the use of a single textbook. The students were not actually doing teamwork in the sense of working together for a common purpose. Quasi-teamwork provides a means to control the classroom.

A traditional form of recitation was observed in which the teacher conducted daily discussions by asking a rapid-fire series of questions and doing most of the work while students sat listening. This pattern of

discourse was asymmetrical with the teacher taking up the time and students having little opportunity to actively participate.

The potential benefits of recitation were observed in one teacher who took a genuine interest in students' ideas, provided opportunity for the students to ask clarifying questions and demonstrate their grasp of ideas. There was sharing of knowledge and mutual understanding between teacher and students.

The observed patterns of conducting recitation, were not appropriate for the level of students and the nature of the subject matter. Students were seldom challenged.

Keeping Order. The establishment of proper authority in the classroom was a strongly expressed concern of the teachers in this study. They viewed the teacher as central to keeping order; "...I impose the discipline on the class..." "the rules in the class are my rules..." Usually the teacher treated the students as adversaries or opponents to be outsmarted and outmaneuvered. The alternative to treating students as adversaries was to treat them as learners. In the case of one teacher, students were not treated as adversaries, the teacher was not sarcastic, did not use ridicule or oneupmanship and did not yell at the students or make examples of them in the presence of their peers. This teacher expressed clear behavioral standards and genuine concern for the students.

Selection of Content

Selection of content was narrow in scope and lacked depth of treatment. Students were not involved in skills of rational analysis and decision making appropriate for participation in a democratic society. They did not examine issues from multiple and rival perspectives. There was little attention to the cognitive levels of comprehension such as stating

problems "in your own words." There was virtually no attention to application of social science or historical generalization to actual political or social problems. Students were not taught to distinguish facts from hypotheses, nor engaged in working with fundamental concepts, or principles of the Constitution so as to form a pattern or design of interrelationships. Expressive or creative projects were not done. Selection of basic historical knowledge was confined primarily to knowledge of terminology and specific facts. Students were introduced to words and phrases such as freedom, rights, government, great compromise, and separation of powers.

Deep human values such as individual liberty and societal responsibility, which are the moral foundation of the Constitution, were not a focus. The teachers treated the Constitution as an end in itself, independent of the ideal of human dignity.

Selections of Materials

A variety of materials such as pictures, diagrams, and teacher made question sheets used. The teachers placed a particular emphasis on social studies textbooks. The students were at the will of the teacher, dependent on the teacher's instructional decisions regarding what would be taught. The students were not, however, without some influence over the text since the text which they actually experienced during the course of instruction was dependent on the students' willingness and capacity to attend.

Although dependent on the textbook as the primary source of legitimate knowledge, none of the teachers actively evaluated the textbooks which they selected. As one teacher stated, "I don't bother to check the interpretation [of the textbook] at all..."

The selection of materials was grounded on factors such as perception of student ability and providing what "the students can deal with ... not too detailed ... not too confusing." The teachers' intention in selecting materials reflected the desire to keep students busy. On the whole, it was surprising the degree to which materials were accepted without reflection or careful review.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The difficulty in teaching about the Constitution is that the values and concepts essential to its fullest understanding require an individual act of contemplation and interpretation. The student must construct meaning in a manner which is different than learning simply that there is a Bill of Rights or that there is separation of power. The student must engage difficult concepts. What is freedom? Liberty? Justice? To comprehend the student must have the opportunity to learn in the presence of a knowing and capable teacher.

These teachers did behave in a rational manner and made decisions according to an explicit and implicit set of standards. The standards which undergirded the classroom setting honored keeping students "busy" and "on task." There was a priority given to the "management" of the classroom and "keeping students under control." It is striking to note that these teachers' expressed beliefs were unfailingly consistent with their observed behavior in the areas of classroom control and order but were inconsistent in the areas of subject matter knowledge and democratic ideals. On the one hand these teachers honored the ideal and expressed high regard for the idea of teaching about the Constitution. But deeper underpinnings were governing the routines which the teachers put into practice. It was not only the higher priority given to keeping order but the stated and unstated mandate to

"cover" United States history and to "go by the textbook" which set standards of instruction.

It is necessary for the teacher of eighth grade social studies to have both scholarly knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, and training of such intensity that the teacher can routinely carry out a program of civic education . This is a training task for both the scholars of history and political science, and the scholars of cognitive development and middle grades pedagogy. The nature of the training task requires a common bond, regular communication, cooperative research, and intensively shared responsibility.